Welcome to ICF *Education Connections*

In our final issue of 2017 we reflect on several sessions that ICF teams contributed to the recent gathering of researchers at the American Evaluation Association (AEA) Conference, November 6-11.

- ICF teams discussed the methodological challenges in evaluating college access programs.

- Another session demonstrated a capacity building practice model that creates a roadmap for evaluators.

- ICF evaluators and their partners presented on the development of tools and analyses of evaluation capacity and evidence building by service providers.

From early education to K-12 and postsecondary schooling, ICF gives clients the insights needed to turn research into practice. Visit our website for more information about ICF's work in education. Want to share *Education Connections*? Click here to subscribe.

ICF Teams Tackle Methodological Challenges

Evaluations of college access and attainment programs are especially vulnerable to methodological challenges because of the disadvantages facing the populations of young people served and the expansive goals of these programs. This AEA panel explored four methodological challenges and the solutions that four different ICF evaluation teams developed when faced with these situations:

- What if I'm planning a QED study but do not have access to pre-intervention baseline data?
- What do I do when I am running an RCT but encounter issues of data collection burden and attrition of teachers and students?
- How do I respond to challenges related to statistical power and representativeness when the treatment group is smaller than originally planned?
- What do I do when students in a longitudinal study move from middle school to high school and then to college and careers, but not in an orderly fashion?

The panel also discussed the tools used, accommodations made, and considerations taken into account as their evaluations progressed from design to reality. To see the presentation PPT, visit this link. ICF plans to post a more extensive white paper on this topic on its website early in the New Year.

AEA 2017
Innovative Strategies for Overcoming Methodological Challenges in the Evaluation of College Access and Attainment Program Evaluations
Authors: TJ Horwood, Jing Sun, Nate Hixson, Samantha Spinney, Kazuaki Uekawa, Aikaterini Passa, Barbara O'Donnel

It's Never Too Early to Engage Your Evaluator

In this lively poster, the authors adopt an infographic style to tell the story of how the Center for States, a federally funded capacity building center, has partnered with its internal evaluators and experts in the field to develop a "Capacity Building Practice Model" that guides its support to child welfare agencies. The model includes specific practice profiles designed to create consistent practice through an explicit, shared set of expectations. It concretely describes and categorizes behaviors into three levels of desired, developmental, and insufficient practice. This creates a roadmap for evaluators as they develop methodologies for determining the level of implementation fidelity to the expected behaviors that illustrate and operationalize Center service delivery principles.

Incorporating both evaluation and practitioner perspectives into the development of a practice model, from the start, facilitates the translation of an organization's principles into clear, measurable operational behaviors that can drive fidelity assessment. Establishing a practice model drives consistency of practice and high quality implementation.

AEA 2017
It's Never Too Early: Engaging Your Evaluator from Model Development to Implementation Fidelity to Outcome Evaluation
Authors: *Christine Leicht, Kim Cowley, Mary Garrison, Brian Deakins, Tori Russell, Simon Pipkin, Nastia Vanyukevych, Katie Campbell.* GRAPHICS: *Michael Lurry*

AEA Panel Reviews Ways to Build Evidence

Service providers frequently generate a lot of data, but face challenges analyzing and making sense of it. They may not know how to connect their data with the community need they are seeking to address or how to use data to assess implementation or document their effectiveness. This AEA panel presented two studies conducted by ICF that assessed evidence building efforts for the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), which funds thousands of nonprofits in health, education, environment, economic opportunities, and tribal communities. The panel consisted of two presentations, one related to the CNCS Building Evidence project, the other, the CNCS VISTA program. These studies incorporated the grantee and funder perspectives, and used methods such as needs assessment, document analysis, and stakeholder interviews. CNCS is using the findings to guide evaluation capacity and evidence building for their grantees, while also helping CNCS itself learn more effectively from its grantees.

The panelists included ICF evaluators and their CNCS partners, who have worked together to develop tools and conduct analyses of evaluation capacity, learning practices, and intersection between evaluation and organizational contexts for CNCS and its grantees. The presentation addressed such questions as: 1) How can evaluators develop tools for assessing evaluation practices and capacities in the context of a wide variety of organizations? 2) How can a funder learn from its grantees, given variations in evaluation capacity and organizational contexts? 3) What are strategies for strengthening learning from evaluation in organizations with contextual barriers to high-quality evaluation?

CNCS administers AmeriCorps State and National (ASN), a program that brings together "AmeriCorps members" and community-based organizations to address local and national needs through community service and volunteer engagement. ASN works in several target areas, including education, economic opportunities, disaster services, environmental stewardship, healthy futures, veterans and military families, capacity building, and tribal communities. In 2016, CNCS engaged ICF to assess the evidence base for service solutions

supported by ASN in all target areas but education and to support evidence building in these areas. As part of this multi-year project, ICF conducted a meta-synthesis to better understand the existing evidence base for service solutions. AmeriCorps VISTA is a national CNCS service program with the mission of building the capacity of non-profits and local and municipal government agencies to fight poverty. It has a historical commitment to evaluation using descriptive and quasi-experimental designs of impact. In 2015 VISTA engaged in a process of assessing prior and extant research on effectiveness and impact, which led to internal discussions about exploring the feasibility of using qualitative data collected for project monitoring for a variety of evaluation purposes.

AEA 2017
Collecting Program Information from the Ground Up: Strategies for Building Organizational Evidence
Authors: Astrid Hendricks, Xiaodong Zhang, Miriam Jacobson, Michael Long, Andrew MacDonald

ICF Publishes on National Assessment of SIF

Two recently published articles in peer-reviewed journals reflect findings from ICF's national assessment of the Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a federal initiative to find and grow community-based nonprofits with evidence of results.

- Zhang, X., Griffith, J., Pershing, J., Sun, J., Malakoff, L., Marsland, W., Peters, K., and Field E., (Fall, 2017) Strengthening Organizational Capacity and Practices for High-Performing Nonprofit Organizations: Evidence from the National Assessment of the Social Innovation Fund—A Public-Private Partnership. *Public Administration Quarterly*. 41(4), 424-461.

- Zandniapour, L., Griffith, J., Zhang, X., Sun, J., and Pershing, J. (2017). Strengthening Organizational Practice. *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*. 7(4), 336-346.

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) commissioned ICF to conduct the national assessment, one component of which is an impact study of changes in grantee organizational capacity and willingness to build evidence for their service models, to scale service models, to adopt evidence-based grant making strategies, and to collaborate to

address local needs. The study found evidence of improved organizational capacities among SIF Classic grantees in most areas. Both articles were based on the impact study.

Review Past Issues

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